

IMAGINING  
IDOLATRY:

*Missionaries,  
Indians, and Jews*



by JUDITH LAIKIN ELKIN





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## P R E F A C E

**T**HE HISTORY OF JEWS in the Americas before ca. 1800 is a somewhat unfamiliar story, and it is one with many dimensions and complexities. It encompasses, for example, the widespread belief in the seventeenth century that the Indians of the New World might in fact be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. It encompasses, also, the passion for Hebrew learning of a number of American Puritans, some of whom sought out the tiny Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island, for discussions on the fine points of the Old Testament. It includes the remarkable efflorescence of tolerant Dutch high culture in Recife, Brazil, in the 1630s and 40s, under the leadership of Count John Maurice of Nassau-Siegen, that led to the establishment of the first open Jewish religious congregation in the Americas, made up of Jews from Amsterdam. And it includes, too, the story of conversos, New Christians, and crypto-Jews in the Americas, who were hounded by the Inquisition in Mexico, Peru, and Brazil, where there was evidence, or the pretense of evidence, of relapse to their historic faith.

The three sponsors of this publication each have a specific interest in the promotion of research and publication related to the early history of the Jews in the Americas. The Program in Judaic Studies at Brown University has a self-evident interest in Jewish culture and religion around the world and throughout history. The Touro National Heritage Trust, founded in 1986, has taken as its goal the establishment of a national center for research and discussion concerning Jewish affairs, which will be housed within the buildings that surround the historic Touro



Synagogue in Newport, a structure that dates back to 1763. And the John Carter Brown Library, which is one of the world's greatest collections of primary sources pertaining to the Americas during the colonial period, takes as its province the entire history of the Western Hemisphere between 1493 and ca. 1825.

Dr. Judith Laikin Elkin of the University of Michigan is a leading authority on the history of Jews in Latin America, the author of, among other works, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (1980). In 1990, she was awarded the first Touro National Heritage Trust Research Fellowship, now offered annually by the John Carter Brown Library. At the same time, Dr. Elkin was appointed a Visiting Scholar in Judaic Studies at Brown University. Much of the research for this essay was accomplished while Dr. Elkin was in residence as a Touro Fellow.

Not all recipients of the Touro Fellowship have been so honored, but it seemed to us that what Professor Elkin had to say was particularly worth distinguishing in the form of this pamphlet, especially in the year 1992, the 500th anniversary, ironically, of both the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and of the European discovery of lands that in time would provide more security and freedom for Jews than had ever been the case before.

For financial assistance with the publication of this pamphlet, we wish to acknowledge contributions from the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island and the Jaffe Foundation.

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IMAGINING IDOLATRY: *Missionaries, Indians, and Jews*





## IMAGINING IDOLATRY

### *Missionaries, Indians, and Jews*

Listen like Christians, and believe, for this is no fable such as you had before under the Incas, but the truth, and no one will be saved who does not believe it. . . . Christ did not just give his life for his friends, but for his enemies. And who were his enemies? the principal persons among the Jews and all idolators. *Sermon delivered during Easter Week by Francisco de Avila, priest of the City of Huanuco, and published in Cuzco in 1648.*

**A**NTI-JEWISH INVECTIVE was a feature of sermons preached by parish priests in Peru and New Spain (Mexico) in the mid-seventeenth century to congregations of recently-converted native Americans and mestizos,<sup>1</sup> scarcely any of whom could ever have had contact with a Jew. In addition to the traditional charge of deicide and other lesser charges such as avarice, sadism, and subversion, the priests accused Jews of idolatry.

Two aspects of these sermons grip the attention most forcibly. The first is the question why the Jews should have been a subject of sermons at all. There were few if any unbaptized Jews in the Spanish Indies, for they were prohibited from going there; and the clergy, both secular and lay, already had a heavy teach-

1. At this date, mestizos were almost entirely the offspring of Spanish fathers and Indian mothers.

ing burden. The church had undertaken to haul the Amerindians into the mainstream of Western, Christian civilization, a task best described in Ricard's pungent phrase as the spiritual conquest of the New World. In order to teach Christian doctrine, the clergy had to educate themselves in the various indigenous languages and what we would now call ethnology. The church's "civilizing mission" required a complete reordering of native family life, the conversion of "savage" dress and foodstuffs to European taste, instruction in European agricultural methods and crops to a demoralized and dispossessed peasantry, and coping with predatory encomenderos<sup>2</sup> who were concerned more with the regular supply of Indian manual labor than with the condition of Indian souls; all this, while living in stressful, utterly novel, physical surroundings. Why, then, Jews? Why Jews-as-idolators?

The clergy were for the most part educated and had read the Bible. Whatever opinion of Jews may have been prevalent, it takes considerable intellectual effort to excise monotheism from Judaism and put idol worship in its place. Some sermons showed familiarity with the central tenet of Jewish belief: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The stark simplicity of this formula throws into relief the problem the priests faced in teaching their charges to distinguish the Catholic images they should venerate from the discredited images the Indians had formerly worshipped and which were now forbidden to them as the work of Satan. The authorized *Christian Doctrine and Catechism for Instruction of the Indians*, published in Lima in 1584

2. Early in the conquest period, Indians were parcelled out to Spanish settlers who were allowed to make use of their labor in exchange for exposing them to Christian teachings. Encomienda soon deteriorated into a form of serfdom.



in Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara, instructs the clergy how to handle this question:

Q. Why do Christians adore images of wood and metal, if it is wrong to adore idols?

A. Christians do not adore these images for themselves, as idolators do, nor do we think they have virtue in themselves. We revere these images for what they represent—Jesus, Maria and the saints, who are in heaven.<sup>3</sup>

This was the response of the sixteenth-century church to the problem of idolatry. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, a different response has taken over. Idolatry is now the crime of Jews and moros<sup>4</sup>, who are the enemies of Christ. The question that drove my recent research at the John Carter Brown Library was how and why Jews came to be charged with idolatry in the seventeenth-century Spanish Indies. The answer illustrates the way in which the authority of the past can be used and abused in the service of ideology.

Does the possibility exist that these charges represent a provincial aberration, some localized delusion that found its public expression at this particular time and place? This explanation is not tenable. The unity of Catholic doctrine and the requirement of conformity in its expression are well established and well known. In the Spanish Indies as in Europe, control over intellectual and cultural expression was exercised by both church

3. Catholic Church. *Doctrina christiana y catecismo para instruccion de los indios* (Lima 1584).

4. The term used in Spain to designate Muslims. It is worth noting that Islam, the heir of both Judaism and Christianity, geographically positioned between monotheism and polytheism, acknowledges its debt to the prophets who preceded Mohammed by classifying both antecedent religions as monotheistic.

and state. A priori censorship for spoken and published utterances was established by the Catholic Kings in 1502 and renewed periodically through the seventeenth century. In its effort to extirpate doctrinal error, the Tridentine Council (1545–1563) mandated its own system of censorship.<sup>5</sup> The priests and friars who preached to the Indians had been trained in Catholic seminaries in Europe, or in American extensions of these institutions. Assigned to various parts of the empire at different times in their careers, the message they delivered was the identical authorized message. The printed versions which were consulted for the present research typically carry the licence and approbation of the preaching order to which the priest belonged, the opinion (*parecer*) of a priest from another order, approval by a church censor, the Viceroy's license to publish, and the license of the Vicar General of the Archbishopric. In some instances, the permits, licenses, and opinions are more extensive than the text that called them forth. The system was designed to enforce conformity to authorized doctrine at every level, not to encourage inspired but idiosyncratic interpretation.

The sermons against the Jews which are a prominent feature of Franciscan and Dominican teachings in the Spanish Indies are all the more puzzling because there were no acknowledged Jews in the Indies at this date. It is well known that the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492; less well known is the fact that Jews and conversos<sup>6</sup> were excluded by law and license from migrating to the Spanish Indies. The number of conversos in the world increased considerably after 1497 when the Portuguese crown forcibly converted all Jews within its borders.<sup>7</sup> Portuguese

5. For an overview of censorship laws, see Miguel Mathes, "El libro europeo en Nueva España," in *Encuentro de dos mundos* (Tel Aviv University, 1989).

6. Jews or the descendants of Jews who had been converted to Christianity either forcibly or voluntarily. Also known as New Christians or Marranos.

7. Portuguese Jewry included the Spanish Jews who had accepted exile



policy with respect to conversos was not as constant as the Spanish; but despite the wider latitude allowed conversos in emigrating to Brazil, the practice of Judaism remained illegal in the Portuguese as in the Spanish colonies.

While being a Jew had not been illegal prior to 1492, Christian converts in Spain (and shortly thereafter, in Portugal) came under the scrutiny of the Inquisition, which was empowered to look into their religious practice in order to determine whether they were "Judaizing"—pursuing the "dead law of Moses"—the crime of heresy, for which the ultimate penalty was death. In both Iberian nations, conversos very soon became the target of laws of *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood") that excluded anyone with a Jewish ancestor from holding public office, practicing a profession, or performing other honorable work. Over the course of time, laws of *limpieza* converted what had originally been a religious distinction into a racial one.<sup>8</sup>

Conversos as well as Jews were excluded from the Spanish Indies in a series of laws that began in 1501 and continued to 1802. But New Christians, like their Old Christian countrymen, were eager to take part in the great adventure of the age, with its promise of gold and glory. Many must have hoped that by removing to the perimeter of empire, they could escape the notice of the Inquisition. Conversos entered the Indies through loopholes in the law or by grace of a license bought from the Crown itself which, increasingly corrupt and constantly in need

from Spain in order to keep their religious faith. These forced converts are known to Jewish history as *anusim*; in the Spanish Indies, they came to be called, simply, Portuguese.

8. On laws of *limpieza de sangre*, see Albert Sicroff, *Les controverses des statuts de "pureté de sang" en Espagne du XVe au XVIIe siècles* (Paris 1960). For linkage of these laws to contemporary manifestations of racism, see Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands: The Origins of American Racism* (Boston 1978) and Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, "Jewish History and Jewish Memory," in *Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture* No. 26 (New York, 1982).



of funds, sold emigration rights to people it officially excluded. Thus the laws of *limpieza* were not an impassable barrier for those clever enough to outwit their enemies.

Though individual New Christians might be tolerated to varying degrees, Judaism was not. Crypto-Jews (sometimes called *marranos*), who had come in the hope that they could remain faithful to the God of their fathers at the desolate far reaches of the known world, paid a heavy price if caught Judaizing.<sup>9</sup> Jews who had never been baptized were beyond the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, but they could be prosecuted for residing in the Indies illegally.

However they entered, and for whatever motive, the one certain datum concerning conversos, including those who continued to regard themselves as Jews, is that none practiced Judaism openly. To have done so would have drawn immediate retribution from both church and state. The Catholic Kings, in their order of expulsion of the Jews from Spain, gave as their reason that they posed a threat to the faith of New Christians recently converted from Judaism. In the Americas, Spain confronted an enormous population of a different kind of New Christian, those recently converted from paganism. Again, the spectre of Jewish conversionary efforts was raised. But if there was any instance of a native American being converted to Judaism through the proselytizing efforts of Jews, we do not know of it, nor is there record of Jews worshipping Indian images. So we are presented with a tantalizing puzzle: the charge of idolatry is levelled at a suppressed population of monotheists who are doing everything

9. Descendants of conversos recently surfaced in the American Southwest. Benjamin Shapiro, "Search for the Buried Past: The Hidden Jews of New Mexico," National Public Radio; and *New York Times* Nov. 11, 1990, I 30:1. Presentations by Stanley E. Hordes, Tomas Atencio, and Frances Hernandez at the "International Conference on the Inquisition in the Americas and the Hidden Jews of the Southwest," University of Arizona, Jan. 27-28, 1991.



possible to keep their beliefs to themselves, and projected repeatedly to congregations of newly-converted Indians and mestizos who will probably never meet a Jew.

The total number of Jews and conversos arrested by the Inquisition in the New World, tried, condemned, and punished, is probably undiscoverable. Seymour Liebman, who examined Inquisition trials for New Spain, New Granada, Peru, and Rio de la Plata, concluded that the first-named tribunal was the most active. In the records for New Spain, he identified 1,744 individuals of both sexes tried between 1522 and 1709 on a variety of charges ranging from blasphemy through seduction in the confessional, of whom 378 or 21.7 percent were convicted of Judaizing.<sup>10</sup> The most frequent punishments for this "crime"—in addition to the expropriation of property exacted from all prisoners—included public lashing (up to 400 blows), the wearing of a penitential garment that provoked public contumely, perpetual imprisonment, labor in the galleys, death by garroting followed by burning, and death by burning. Beyond the penalty exacted from prisoners, all these punishments brought instant impoverishment to their families and ineradicable shame to their descendants.

Scholars continue to differ as to the number of New Christians who may actually have been secretly following Jewish rites. There is agreement that whatever these rites may have been, due to the conversos' isolation from the Jewish world, they differed considerably from normative Judaism. If not for the machinery of oppression that followed conversos to the New World, Judaism might well have faded away completely since there were no schools, books, rabbis, or synagogues to transmit knowledge of the religion. Why, then, were the clergy

10. Seymour Liebman, *The Inquisitors and the Jews in the New World* (Coral Gables, 1974), p.33.

drawn to increasing condemnation of conversos as secret Judaizers?

Historians have not been negligent in researching the Inquisition in the New World, with respect not only to its operation against accused Judaizers, but also to its proceedings against accused witches, bigamists, concupiscent priests, and others who violated official norms of behavior.<sup>11</sup> In summary form, these are the reasons that have been adduced by historians.

1. Christian triumphalism, engendered by military victories over, first, the Moslems, then the Amerindians, had persuaded Spaniards of their divine mission to bring the entire world to Christ. This spirit was encapsulated by the sixteenth-century Spanish historian, Gerónimo de Mendieta, in the first chapter of his monumental history of the conquest of the Indies:

11. The bibliography for this subject is extensive, and includes José Toribio Medina's five volumes on the various Inquisition tribunals and Henry C. Lea's four-volume *History of the Inquisition in Spain*. Among twentieth-century scholars whose work should be consulted for the Inquisition generally, are Richard Greenleaf, Julio Caro Baroja, C.R. Boxer, Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Julio Jiménez Rueda, Henry Kamen, and Lucia Garcia de Proodian. With specific reference to Jews, see Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr: The Story of a Secret Jew and the Mexican Inquisition in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1973); Boleslao Lewin, *Mártires y conquistadores judíos en la América hispana* (Buenos Aires, 1954) and *La inquisición en Hispanoamérica (judíos, protestantes y patriotas)*, (Buenos Aires, 1962); Seymour B. Liebman's numerous works, including *The Jews in New Spain: Faith, Flame, and the Inquisition* (Coral Gables, 1970), *The Inquisitors and the Jews in the New World: Summaries of Procesos, 1500-1810 and bibliographical guide* (Coral Gables, 1975), and *New World Jewry, 1493-1825: Requiem for the Forgotten* (New York, 1982); and Stanley M. Hordes, "The Crypto-Jewish Community of New Spain, 1620-1649: A Collective Biography" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1980). For Brazil, see Nelson Omegna, *Diabolização dos Judeus* (Rio de Janeiro, 1969); José Gonçalves Salvador, *Cristãos-novos, jesuítas e Inquisição* (São Paulo, 1969); and Anita Novinsky, *Cristãos novos en Bahia* (São Paulo, 1972).



Ch. 1. How it would seem that, with the conquest of New Spain by Don Fernando Cortés, God had sent another Moses to liberate the natives from the slavery of Egypt. . . . One must ponder greatly, how without any doubt God singled out and took for his instrument this valiant captain don Fernando Cortés, as his means for opening the door and making way for the preachers of his gospel in this new world, where the conversion of many souls would restore and compensate the Catholic church for the great damage and harm being done to our ancient Christianity at exactly the same time by the cursed Luther. Fortunately, what was lost in one quarter, was regained in another. Thus, it is not without mystery that in the same year that Luther was born in Eisleben, a town in Saxony, Hernando Cortés was born in Medellin, a town in Spain; the one to upset the world and to draw under the Devil's banner many of the faithful who from fathers' and grandfathers' time had been Catholic; the other to bring into union with the church an infinite multitude of peoples who for years without number had been under the power of Satan, enveloped in vice and blinded by idolatries.<sup>12</sup>

In this grand triumphal vision, Jews were an obstacle to the pre-ordained triumph of the Catholic faith, an anachronism<sup>13</sup> and a standing reproach to the efficacy of Christian evangelists. Laws of *limpieza de sangre*, which converted Judaism from a religion

12. Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, of the Franciscan Order, *The Ecclesiastical History of the Indies*. Written in the final years of the 16th century.

13. The persistence of this view of Judaism surfaced recently with the statement by Dr. John Strugnell of Harvard University's Divinity School, at the time chief editor of the Dead Sea Scrolls, to the effect that what annoyed him about Judaism was "The fact that it has survived when it should have disappeared." Quoted in the *New York Times* 12/12/90, p.1.



to a disease of the blood, extended this vision into the genetic make-up of New Christians, making it impossible for Old Christians to accept conversions as genuine, though some historians believe that as many faithful Catholics as faithful Jews died at the stake as Judaizers. Laws of *limpieza* institutionalized the prejudice that not just every Jew, but every converso bore the indelible mark of Cain. Fr. Domingo de Soussa, preaching at the auto de fe "celebrated" in Mexico in 1699, taught that Abel was the semblance of the first Christian while Cain was the first Jew and the first heretic.<sup>14</sup>

2. Since expropriation of property was the first action taken

14. "Cargando el peso de la maldición divina con el sempiterno oprobrio, que David les predijo, huyendo de los hombres asustados de que no les mate el zelo Católico señalados como Cain para que no les quiten la vida, escondiendose de todos en sus sinagogas, sin Dios, sin sacerdotes, sin yglesia, y sin ley, siendo la perfida obstinada proterbia del primer Iudio Cain, viva sombra de la radicada dureza de la innata perfidia, y cegüedad congenita, que en todos los mas Iudios contemplamos, como que sea negada su conversión, desde el primer bosquejo suyo en los principios de el mundo, reserbada, a sus fines, por justos divinos juizios; toda la culpa porque se le intimo la sentencia de eterna condenación a Cain, fue segun San Ambrosio no por haver muerto a su hermano, sino por averle quitado la vida a Abel, Abel, siendo Abel el hermano a quien mató; recurro a la significación del nombre, para entender a el Santo; Abel se interpreta llanto, que es el mas eficaz penitente arrepentimiento; pues si Cain mató no solo a Abel sino su llanto, y penitencia, que mucho sea la muerte de su dolor la causa de su sentencia? Si huviera quedado en Cain vivo como llanto Abel, ni fuera obstinado, ni estuviera eternamente muerto; le diera su penitencia vida; fue su obstinación su muerte y esto que consiguió la malicia diabólica de Cain, fue lo que en la primera tentación con nuestro padres primeros intento, quiso fuesse un proprio acto del albedrio la culpa, y la obstinación, por esso les dijo, que serían en plural como dioses;...la voluntad obstinados como ellos son por naturaleza."

"Bearing the weight of the divine curse with its everlasting opprobrium (which David predicted), fleeing from men who fear that he may kill them, marked like Cain so that they may not kill them, hiding themselves in syn-



by the Inquisitors upon arrest of an individual, it is easy to accuse the institution of being motivated by greed. The historical record provides considerable support for this view, even among historians such as Richard Greenleaf who believe that the Inquisition held itself generally to higher standards of morality than prevailed elsewhere in Europe at the same time. The *visita* (general accounting) of the Mexican Holy Office in the years 1645–49 determined that massive peculation by the Inquisitors had accompanied the prosecution of Judaizers. The proceeds of the auto de fe of 1649 alone came to at least 3 million pesos, and Greenleaf concludes that “the confiscation of Judaizante wealth laid a firm foundation for the Holy Office’s budget in the sec-

agogues, without God, without priests, without church, and without law, remaining obstinate in the perfidy of the first Jew Cain, living shadow of the enrooted hardheartedness of innate perfidy, and congenital blindness, which we see in all Jews, as though their conversion were negated, from their first outline in the beginnings of the world, reserved, at its limits for divine judgment; all the blame because the eternal damnation of Cain was, according to Saint Ambrosio, not for having killed his brother, but for having deprived of life Abel, Abel, Abel was the brother he killed. Consider the significance of the name, in order to understand the saint. Abel means “wail,” [Sp. *llanto*] which is the most effective penitential remorse; . . . For if Cain killed not only Abel, but also his wail, his penitence, to what extent is the death of sorrow the cause of his sentence? If the wail of penitence had remained alive in Cain, if he were not obstinate, he would not be eternally dead; his obstinacy caused his death, and this follows the diabolical malice of Cain. . . .” Domingo de Soussa, *Sermon en el auto publico de feé, que el tribunal de el Santo Officio de Nueva España celebró el día catorze de Junio de 1699* (Mexico, 1699).

Soussa concludes by urging the prisoners who are about to be burned alive not to be obstinate like Cain, but to revive the *llanto* within them. In addition to his other transgressions, Soussa misunderstood his Hebrew. “Wail” is אבל but Abel’s name was הבל. For the uses of antisemitism in establishing a Christian identity, see Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide. The Theological Roots of Antisemitism* (New York, 1979).

ond half of the seventeenth century."<sup>15</sup> The upward of one hundred Portuguese New Christians arrested by the Inquisition in Lima in 1635 included some of the greatest merchants of the then Atlantic trade. Several historians have carried out a detailed accounting of the goods expropriated from them, and one concludes,

There is a positive correlation between the New Christian persecutions and the financial consolidation of the Inquisition as an effective and relatively autonomous institution.... A period of major disorder in the Inquisition's sources of income coincided with the main persecution of Portuguese [New Christian] merchants which began in 1635.... After the expropriations of 1635-1641 the Inquisition's budget again acquired its balance."<sup>16</sup>

3. Commercial competition is a traditional stimulus to prejudice against Jews, one that reasserts itself periodically in all ages. The way in which religious prejudice could be placed at the service of commercial competition can be illustrated by an incident in 1529, when a Spanish merchant petitioned the monarch to prohibit

15. Richard E. Greenleaf, "The Great Visitas of the Mexican Holy Office 1645-1669." *The Americas* 44, 4 (April 1988):399-420. The visita was the official accountability review carried out for every Crown official at the expiration of his term of office.

16. Alfonso W. Quiroz, "The Expropriation of Portuguese New Christians in Spanish America, 1635-1649." *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* N.F. Jg 11 H.4 1985:407-65. p. 410, 423-24. See also José Toribio Medina, *Historia del Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición de Lima 1569-1820* (Santiago, 1887); Boleslao Lewin, *El Santo Oficio en América y el más grande proceso inquisitorial en el Perú* (Buenos Aires, 1950); Rene Millar Corbacho, "Las confiscaciones de la Inquisición de Lima a los comerciantes de origen judío-portugues de 'la gran complicidad' de 1635," in *Revista de Indias* (Madrid) 43(1983):27-58.



the giving of Indians in encomienda to the son or grandson of any person burned or reconciled by the Inquisition "because of the danger to our holy faith." The petitioner goes on to denounce a competitor, "of whom it is said that his father had been a Jew."<sup>17</sup> Quiroz writes of the Old Christian merchants that they "...not only complained constantly about the Portuguese trade, but also were involved directly in the repression of the Portuguese New Christian merchants in the period 1635-39 while performing honorary official tasks for the Inquisition."<sup>18</sup>

4. The mid-seventeenth century was a time when millennial expectations among both Christians and Jews had reached ecstatic proportions. Cabbalists believed that 1648 was to be the year of redemption, for which all Europe had strong need following thirty years of harrowing religious warfare. Among Jews, the Chmielnicki pogroms in Poland and renewed pressure by the Inquisition in territory under Spanish rule (which included most of the known Western Hemisphere), increased the traditional yearning for the coming of the Messiah. In 1650, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel published his apocalyptic book, *Esperanza de Israel*,<sup>19</sup> based on the account by a converso traveller who claimed to have made contact with Jews living hidden away in the Andes Mountains—

17. José Toribio Medina, *La primitiva inquisición Americana, 1493-1569*. (Santiago de Chile, 1914). p. 32.

18. Quiroz, p. 418.

19. The best edited text of this work is *Menasseh ben Israel, The Hope of Israel. The English Translation by Moses Wall, 1652*. Edited, with introduction and notes, by Henry Méchoulan and Gérard Nahon. Published for the Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1987. For informed commentary on Menasseh in the context of his times, see Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard H. Popkin, *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*. (Leiden and New York, 1989). A compact discussion of millenarianism is to be found in David S. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603-1655*. (Oxford, 1982).



possible evidence that the dispersion of the Jews was now complete, clearing the way for the advent of the Messiah. Sabbatai Zevi declared his messiahship in Smyrna in 1665, setting off a wave of religious exaltation among Jews and Christians alike. Christian millenarians had set 1660 as the date of the Second Coming of Christ, at which time they expected that all surviving Jews would be converted overnight. With chiliastic sects proliferating in the ruins of central Europe, apocryphal writings were studied for clues as to when the messiah would appear, an occurrence that seemed increasingly likely. In that eventuality, from the point of view of those in power, it would be better if it were not another Jewish messiah.

5. By mid-seventeenth century, the outposts of the Spanish empire were under attack by Portuguese and Dutch corsairs. In an atmosphere of tension generated by the presence of ships of foreign rivals trespassing in waters claimed—with papal backing—to belong to Spain by divine right, the search for subversives and traitors began. Prosecutions of alleged Judaizers increased during periods when attacks by hostile foreign powers on Spanish territories were expected.

The pattern of suspicion was set by events surrounding the capture of Bahia by the Dutch in 1624. The defeat of the Portuguese on the important sugar exporting coast of Brazil was charged to the account of New Christians who had lived there for generations, and who were alleged to have assisted the invaders because of a desire to benefit from Dutch religious toleration, which would permit them to return to Judaism. A Brazilian historian has shown convincingly that New Christians in Bahia, far removed from their Jewish origins, reacted to invasion in the same ways as their Old Christian neighbors: some supported the Portuguese, some the Dutch. An inquest held by Bishop Dom Pedro da Silva following the reconquest of the city by the Portuguese heard denunciations of 80 persons for coop-



eration with the Dutch. Among those denounced were 48 Old Christians, 24 New Christians, and 8 priests.<sup>20</sup>

The canard of Jewish treachery was employed to spook the citizens of Lima in 1635 when the entire converso community was arrested overnight in an operation that went down in history as “la gran complicidad.” Interestingly, in the interrogations carried out in Inquisition cells, there are references to some merchants’ association with the Dutch West Indies Company, but no evidence of involvement in a “conspiracy.” Nor did the priests who delivered the self-congratulatory sermons that accompanied the auto de fe take credit for nipping a conspiracy in the bud. Fr. Fernando Montesinos, speaking at the auto de fe performed in Lima on 23 of January 1639, at which 10 persons were burned at the stake and various other punishments meted out to those who had not already died in their cells, describes the prisoners as comprising a “gran complicidad.” The only proof he brings forward is that the prisoners attempted to communicate between cells by tapping out words alphabetically.<sup>21</sup> No prisoner was in fact charged, convicted, or executed for conspiracy during this “gran complicidad,” raising the question of who, in fact, conspired against whom?

20. Anita Novinsky, *Cristãos Novos na Bahia* (São Paulo, 1972). For the invasion and the inquests that followed, see Novinsky, “A Historical Bias: The New Christian Collaboration with the Dutch Invaders of Brazil.” Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies. Vol. 22 (1972):141–54; Novinsky, “Uma Devassa do Bispo D. Pedro da Silva,” in *Anais do Museu Paulista* (São Paulo, 1968); and Stuart Schwartz, “The Voyage of the Vassals: Royal Power, Noble Obligations, and Merchant Capital before the Portuguese Restoration of Independence, 1624–1640,” *HAHR* 96,3 (1991): 735–62.

21. *Auto de la fe celebrado en Lima a 23 de enero de 1639*. (Madrid, 1640). Nor is a “conspiracy” mentioned by Fr. Joseph de Zisneros, who delivered the sermon on this occasion. Medina, who examined the procesos (trial records), found in them no mention of conspiracy.

The major period of repression of accused Judaizers in New Spain occurred in the years 1642–49, triggered by the revolt of the Portuguese Duque de Bragança against Spanish rule, and the corresponding fear that Portuguese living in the Americas would collaborate in attacks on the colonies. The ensuing xenophobia created the conditions for a crackdown on a specific class of Portuguese, the conversos. Two hundred and twelve conversos were arrested during this period, appearing at a series of autos de fe to receive their punishment. The charge brought against the prisoners was not treason, but the criminal heresy of Judaizing; nevertheless, a lasting perception was created of New Christians as traitors and subversives. Their confiscated property never was remitted to the Spanish Suprema, as regulations required, but remained in the pockets of members of the local tribunal.<sup>22</sup>

The conjunction of these five elements: Christian triumphalism, greed, commercial rivalry, millenarianism, and fear of a foreign enemy, all came together to create a congenial atmosphere for what in later centuries would be called a pogrom. In this context, “great conspiracies” were discovered in Peru, Brazil, and New Spain, and the Inquisition stepped up its prosecution of supposed Jews and New Christian Judaizers.

One question, however, remains unanswered: what is the meaning of the charge of idolatry that starts to figure in priestly rhetoric in the mid-seventeenth century? What was on the church’s agenda when it levelled this charge? The answer provides us with a new perspective on a complex and self-contradictory age.

The herculean efforts of frontier missionary friars, backed by the force of invading armies, led within a generation of the con-

22. Stanley Hordes, “The Crypto-Jewish Community,” Ch. IV; and Greenleaf, “The Great Visitas.”



quest to the apparent conversion to Catholicism of the entire Amerindian population that remained alive. But the friars of the various teaching orders and the secular priests who followed in their footsteps came to realize over the course of time that, beneath the newly-acquired veneer of Catholicism, many Indians continued to cling to their old beliefs.<sup>23</sup> The discovery of images hidden in caves or behind false walls in village churches, the existence of priests of the old pagan faith who taught that abandoning ancestral beliefs would lead to disaster (as indeed it had), or who at best suggested that this new god, Jesus Christ, could be comfortably accommodated among the other gods, all under the guise of Catholic ritual, caused severe anguish to the clergy who had imagined the task of evangelization complete.<sup>24</sup> Outraged and enraged by the discovery that their congregants, apparently so obedient, could spurn the promise of salvation in favor of familiar pagan rituals, the Catholic priests fought back with the harsh measures they deemed necessary for the task of routing the forces of Satan: the destruction of anything that could be related in any way to the old religion; and

23. Priests who spent long years in close contact with the Indians recognized that at celebrations such as Corpus Cristi, something else, something distinctly non-Christian, was going on. Louise Burkhart argues in a recent book against the traditional view that a religious syncretism harmonized Christianity with Nahua religious belief. "Syncretism implies a resolution of contradictions, but that did not occur." Rather, Nahua structures and functions imposed themselves on Christian content, while the logical structure of the universe remained Nahua. Christianity was "patched in where it fit." *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth Century Mexico* (Tucson, 1989), p.187f.

24. Burkhardt comments in passing that "Catholicism's emphasis on images permitted an easy transition for idolators," but nothing in the record supports that view.

imprisonment, torture, confiscation of goods, and burning at the stake for those accused of practicing it.

In 1540 in Mexico, Franciscan bishop Juan de Zumárraga prosecuted the Indian cacique Chichimecatecotl, known by his baptismal name of don Carlos de Mendoza, for heretical dogmatizing against the faith, and for idolatry. No witness was presented who claimed to have seen him serve or worship an idol in any way. But enough witnesses testified to don Carlos's subversive speech to cause his conviction as a heretic.<sup>25</sup> At the auto de fe where he was to receive his punishment, don Carlos requested permission to speak to his people in their own language. Permission granted, he confessed his faith as a Christian and urged his people likewise to be good Christians. In these circumstances, the prisoner should have been admitted to reconciliation. He was not, but in clear contravention of the Inquisition's rules of due process was apparently burned to death on the spot.

Don Carlos had been accused of idolatry by his nephew. One aspect of the matter that the bishops failed to investigate was whether there might have been an ulterior motive for the denunciation. In fact, the nephew was a rival claimant to the estate of his late father, don Carlos's brother. With the execution of don Carlos, the suit was settled: the Church expropriated the

25. At secret meetings with other caciques, don Carlos had spoken in ways calculated to rouse rebellion against the Spanish. Richard Greenleaf provides a transcription of one of his speeches in *Zumarraga and the Mexican Inquisition*, p. 70: "Who are those that undo us and disturb us and live on us and we have them on our backs and they subjugate us? Well here I am, and there is the Lord of Mexico, Yoanize, and there is my nephew Tezapille, Lord of Tacuba, and there is Tlakahuepantli, Lord of Tula, that we are all equal and in agreement and no one shall equal us, that this is our land, and our treasure and our jewel, and our possession, and the dominion is ours and belongs to us."



disputed land for itself. The resemblance to Inquisitorial practice with respect to conversos is unmistakable. A charge of religious deviation is levelled against a New Christian who is perceived to hold subversive political ideas, and who owns property that will be free for the taking once the deviant has been convicted. This resemblance has never been remarked upon by historians of the "spiritual conquest" of the Indies.

The case of don Carlos shows the church proceeding against New Christians who were native Americans in the same manner, and with the same mixed motives, as against New Christians who were descended from Jews. But the cacique's trial and execution led to an entirely different outcome than the trials and executions of suspected Judaizers. The absence of approved legal procedures during don Carlos's trial sparked an investigation by the Spanish Crown, which from the start had taken the Indians under its protection.<sup>26</sup> The result was the removal of the inquisitorial power from the bishops. Partly as a result of the atrocious mismanagement of don Carlos's case, the crown never placed Indians under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition; as newcomers to the faith, they were not to be charged with heresy.

In this manner, the church lost an important weapon for enforcing doctrinal conformity among the Indians. This loss must have been particularly galling as successive generations of priests became aware of the cathexis of pre-Columbian values on which Indian culture continued to be centered. The longer the Spanish friars stayed in the Indies, the more aware they became that the Indians were following Catholic form while living the substance of their native tradition. Frustrated in their

26. The philosophical basis for Spanish policy toward the Indians is set forth in Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians. A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Bloomington, 1975).



effort to remake the Indians in the mold of the European peasantry, the priests came to form the opinion that the Indians' "brutish nature" could only be dealt with by the enforcement of strict discipline.<sup>27</sup> They faced a frustrating situation: practices which they perceived as idolatrous were going on all about them, but they were helpless to punish the perpetrators in what they regarded as just measure for their sin. Fortunately, there was someone else whom it was not only legal, but meritorious, to burn: the Judaizers, real or imagined.

How familiar with Jews were these Spanish priests and friars? Diego Durán, sixteenth-century Dominican missionary to the Aztecs, believed the Aztecs to be descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel because of their cowardice. Furthermore, he "could not help but be persuaded" by the similarity of their customs: "the sacrifice of children, the eating of human flesh, the killing of prisoners of war, all of these being Jewish ceremonies." Durán, born in Spain forty-five years after the Jews had been expelled from that country, was brought to Mexico at the age of eight. There, he lived in an Indian village until entering a monastery at age nineteen. What he "knew" of Jews came to him only through the teachings of his church.<sup>28</sup>

Confusion between Jew and Indian is apparent in documents of the period. In manuscript, and even in print, *iudío* easily becomes *indio* and vice versa. In the text of that same sermon by Fr. Francisco de Avila that is cited at the beginning of this

27. The execution of don Carlos was far from being an isolated miscalculation. In 1562, Bishop Diego de Landa carried out a reign of terror among the Maya of Yucatan, and "lesser" penalties than burning—such as 200 lashes, seven years in the galleys, etc.—continued to be imposed throughout the sixteenth century. However, the Indians were never formally placed under the jurisdiction of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

28. Diego Durán, *Historia de las indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra firme*. (Mexico, 1951), pp. 1–8.



paper, Jesus is guarded by soldiers and some princes of *los indias*. (The masculine definite article provides a clue that the noun it modifies was originally masculine). The Quechua translation correctly shows *iudios*. Book 7 title 5 Law 29 of the *Recopilación de la leyes de las indias* states that all children of judíos are to be expelled from the Indies. The original, 1681 edition is quite unequivocal about this. However, in the 1756 edition, it is all the children of *indios* who are to be expelled, a far more difficult order to carry out.<sup>29</sup>

These orthographic slips mirrored actual confusion in European minds between Indians and Jews. The fever of messianic speculation that gripped Europe in the seventeenth century focused on the supposed descent of the Amerindians from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. A considerable literature was generated by partisans of all aspects of the debate.<sup>30</sup> Some authors found remarkable similarities between the two populations: that mothers suckled their own children, for example, or that some

29. The first compilation of the laws of the Indies was edited by Antonio Leon Pinelo, the son of a converso, grandson of Jews who had been burned at the stake. A conforming Catholic, Leon Pinelo was harrassed all his life because of the "blot" on his escutcheon; he was most unlikely to confuse "judío" and "indio." The "Freudian slip," however, persists into the twentieth century. Some years ago, I found the famous Argentine novel, *Los gauchos judíos*, listed on the Harvard Library shelf list as *Los gauchos indios*.

30. In addition to the studies cited in footnote 19, the basic reading list on this subject begins with Thomas Thorowgood, *Jewes in America or Probabilities that the Americans are of that Race...* (London, 1650); Menasseh ben Israel, *La esperanza de Israel* (Amsterdam, 1650); and Hamon L'Estrange, *Americans no Jewes* (1652). The history of this polemic will be found in Richard H. Popkin, "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory," in Kaplan, Méchoulán, Popkin, eds., *Menasseh ben Israel and His World* (Leiden, 1989). The author states, "The history of the theory provides an insight into the changing ways Europeans and European Americans saw their place in the world, and the changing ways they perceived the world." (p. 63).



Indians appeared to be circumcised. Reading these sermons, one finds characteristics attributed to Jews—cannibalism, for example—that were being attributed to Indians at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Rolena Adorno notes this overlap and speculates that “The search for similarities and the elaboration of comparisons, on the one hand, between the Amerindian and the Jew and on the other between the Amerind and the Moor or Morisco, reveal the process of fixing ‘otherness’ by grasping onto similarities.”<sup>32</sup> In trying to understand the otherness of the Indians, Europeans tried to fit these new peoples into categories they thought they understood better. The conflation of Judaism with savage religion was a hallmark of European clerical mentality, and European-educated missionaries transmitted it to the Americas as conscientiously as they did any other article of their faith. Lay persons living in Catholic realms did not have access to the Bible; but the clergy did. Clearly, they studied it through the spectacles of their own preconceptions.

This confusion between Jews and Indians also had negative consequences for the latter, the full extent of which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Evidence comes from the rules for admission to the Franciscan order. Like other religious orders, the Franciscans had prohibited the admission of judeo-conversos since 1488, a time when Jews still lived in Spain. Admission of Indians or mestizos to the Order was prohibited after 1539 in

31. Possibly erroneously. For a deconstructed view of the perception of cannibalism among Native Americans, see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797*. (London, 1989)

32. Rolena Adorno, “El sujeto colonial y la construcción cultural de la alteridad,” in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Lationamericana* Año xiv, no. 28, Lima, 2do. semestre de 1988, p.63. The contemporary reinterpretation of the encounter between Europe and America begins with Edmundo O’Gorman *The Invention of America* (Westport, Conn., 1961) and continues with Tzvetan Todorov, *La Conquête de l’Amérique*, (Paris, 1982).



language derived from the ancient statutes of *limpieza de sangre*. Gradually, these prohibited classes had merged, till Indians and mestizos came to be included in language that originated in the exclusion of judeo-conversos. The historian Jerónimo de Mendieta closes the circle when he comments that "just as those converted from Judaism were new Christians and thus prevented from joining religious orders, so also should Indians be barred because they too were 'nuevos en la Fe.'" The modern historian of the Franciscan order comments that "it is not difficult to surmise that the Indian and the mestizo had taken the place occupied by the Jews in Spain."<sup>33</sup>

Now we come to Jewish idols. Were any ever found? In Inquisition records of "sinagogas" claimed to have been discovered in Lima and Mexico, no mention is made of idols having been found in them. The priests who interrogated New Christians accused of Judaizing did not ask whether they were worshipping idols, but whether they were following "the dead law of Moses," in the cant phrase of the time. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the friars did not check their rhetoric against the evidence of their senses. In the mid-seventeenth century, the authority of the past was still for them the final arbiter. If we read the sermons, we learn that the "evidence" of Jewish idolatry came not from contemporary testimony but from the teaching of St. John Chrysostom, one of the church fathers who preached in Antioch in the fourth century of the Christian era. John Goldenmouth is the most frequently quoted patristic author in this group of sermons from the seventeenth-century Spanish Indies, and he delivered eight homilies against the Jews which we find quoted at autos de fe thirteen centuries later. John's purpose at the time was to break Christians newly-converted from

33. Francisco Morales, O.F.M., *Ethnic and Social Background of the Franciscan Friars in Seventeenth Century Mexico* (Washington 1973), pp. 14-18.



paganism of their habit of going to the source by frequenting synagogues, which he referred to as "lairs of demons, no different from pagan temples."<sup>34</sup> His twentieth-century biographer states that it is most unlikely that anyone hearing John preach took his rhetorical charges literally, but goes on to say that this would not be the first text to be wrenched out of its temporal context by later generations. Indeed, Chrysostom himself made a habit of doing precisely this in his sermons. In this saint, the Spanish friars found an authority who spoke directly to their need.

Preaching at an auto de fe in New Spain that took place on June 14, 1699, Domingo de Soussa quotes John Chrysostom and adds that, in worshipping the golden calf, "the Hebrew people opposed themselves to their zealous inquisitor, Moses." He fol-

34. Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Berkeley, 1983). The importance of John's teachings on the Jews is underscored in the Epilogue to this book, which is generally sympathetic to Chrysostom as a creature of his time. Wilken writes:

Many religious works from antiquity have double lives, a life in the time in which they were first composed and a second life as they were read, studied, and used by later generations. Because of John's popularity as a preacher, the purity of his Greek style, and his exemplary life and martyrdom, his writings have exerted a powerful influence on later Christians. In the generation immediately after his death, some of his works began to circulate through the Church . . . . Today hundreds of manuscripts of his writing are to be found in the libraries of Western Europe, the Soviet Union, Greece, the Middle East, and the United States . . . . Given the popularity of these homilies among the writings of John Chrysostom, *it is apparent that the sermons on the Jews have been a factor in forming Christian attitudes in times and places far removed from ancient Antioch.* (pp. 161-2).

(Emphasis added).

In addition, it is fascinating to learn that John's homilies against the Jews were in fact aimed, not at them, but at the Arians. An early example of vituperative surrogacy.



lows up this piece of biblical hermeneutics with this cry to the prisoner at the stake: "Go, then, in your arrogance, to the all-embracing voracity of the flames of hell. And you, distinguished members of the Tribunal, enjoy the triumph you have won."<sup>35</sup> This was one of the last autos to take place in the New World, in part because of a change of regime in Spain, in part because there were no identifiable New Christians left to prosecute. The great autos of Lima and Mexico City erased the last vestiges of Judaism; their descendants, hiding any indication of Jewish ancestry, had been totally absorbed into the general population by the end of the seventeenth century.

In the waning years of their existence, the marginalized class of Portuguese New Christians, so vulnerable to the charge of Judaizing, came to be used as a surrogate for that other class of New Christians—those descended from Indians—whom the Crown had placed beyond the reach of the Inquisition. The need for such a surrogate emerges plainly from the sermons being delivered to the Indians at that time.

During the years of the "great conspiracy" in Peru, Fr. Francisco Davila, wrestling with the devil in Huanuco, wrote a number of essays which were published posthumously, at a time when the author presumably was enjoying the correction he had prescribed for others whom he considered to be false Christians. Two of the essays concern the discovery of entire villages of Indians who, he believes, continue to worship idols. The third is a sermon delivered to the Indians of Huanuco:

For God's sake, I beg you to listen with attention. Because what I have to say to you must be believed; it is an article of

35. Domingo de Soussa, *Sermon en el auto público de feé, que el Tribunal de el Santo Officio de Nueva España celebró el día catorze de junio de 1699* (Mexico, 1699).

Faith. Look ye, how we pray the Credo.... It is imperative to believe... and he who does not believe is a heretic and deserves to be burned to death. Have you understood?<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, most Native Americans living under Spanish rule "understood" what was required of them, not least, perhaps, because they were required to attend the periodic burnings of those other New Christians, those who descended from Jews. The friars, faced by the challenge of extirpating idolatry among Native Americans recently converted from paganism, were powerless to punish them as they thought they should be punished. But when the political climate was right, it became possible to teach the Indians by analogy. The reason for charging the Portuguese New Christians with idolatry was not because Jews worshipped idols, but because the missionaries believed that the Indians did.

36. Francisco de Avila (Davila), *Tratado de los evangelios que nuestra madre la iglesia propone en todo el año* (Cuzco, 1648), p. 431. Davila himself presents a rewarding subject for psychohistorians. Born in Cuzco in 1592, he attended the University of Lima, where he studied canon law. He wrote and published a book of sermons for the entire year in Quechua. The document naming him canon states that he is "hombre de moderadas letras, buena opinión en sus costumbres, criollo deste reino, y aunque hay opinión que son conocidos sus padres, el se cuenta por expuesto, y en cualquiera destes dos caminos es mestizo, segun se tiene por mas cierto." (Medina, *La imprenta en Lima*, item #45) ("He is moderately well learned, of good habits, a criollo of this kingdom, and although opinion holds that his parents are known, he holds himself to be a foundling; and by whatever way he came to it, he is certainly mestizo.") Recalling that mestizos were prevented from entering holy orders, we find this man denying his own mother in order to become a priest, and going on to a successful career extirpating idolatry by, among other things, denying the mother of Christ.



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